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ABSTRACT

An integration of the humanities and the sciences is proposed as being essential for the creation of a holistic environmental ideology. Language arts is identified as the means for integrating other subjects around environmental themes. The acculturative role of the language arts and its influence in developing biological, cultural, and social understanding is explained. Specific suggestions are offered that illustrate the integrative potential of the language arts. These include techniques involving: (1) reading and comprehension skills; (2) listening activities; (3) interviewing; (4) vocabulary development; (5) speech and dramatics; and (6) creative writing. (ML)

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Bringing a Holistic Environmental Ideology into our Shared National Culture Through Language Arts

by

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Since the early 1970s environmental education has been recognized as an important element of many elementary curricula. Although most proponents advocated environmental education as a way of teaching, it has typically been introduced as a unit of study in either science or social studies, or as a one week experience at an outdoor centre with little or no classroom follow-up. As such, environmental education has had minimal impact, has not realized its integrative potential, and has fostered a very segmented, one-sided view of environmental issues (McInnis, 1982; Sale and Lee, 1972).

Such a segmented educational approach tends to reflect the way society has traditionally dealt with crucial environmental issues (Cotgrove, 1982; Miller, 1982). Solutions tend to be polarized with a very reductionist, empirical approach that relies on science and technology at one end, and a very subjective, humanist approach at the other.

The crux of the matter is that environmental issues are imbeded in a very complex, interrelated biosphere. As such, approaches taken to resolve such issues must be holistic in nature, being able to consider problems from a variety of viewpoints and perspectives. The humanities and the sciences need to be integrated and expanded upon so as to create a holistic environmental ideology.

In order to foster this holistic approach, environmental

education should also be conceived of holistically. Rather than belonging solely to the domain of science or social studies, it should be incorporated into every subject in the curriculum as an integrative core. In the words of McInnis (1982, p.210) "Environmental education is an attempt to bring together our fragmentary disciplinary mode of thinking. By incorporating the perspectives of each subject a truely holistic environmental ideology can be encouraged.

Although it is important to consider the contribution each subject can make in developing a holistic environmental ideology, the role of the language arts is particularly important. For not only does language arts receive the greatest amount of attention in the elementary curriculum (New Brunswick Dept. of Education, 1979), it can also expand the environmental learning associated with science and social studies and act as a catalyst for integrating other subjects around an environmental theme or topic.

The Role of Language Arts in Environmental Education

Litchfield and Fraser (1978) recognized the important contribution the language arts make towards the development of a holistic environmental ideology in stating,

> It is essential that the skills language arts teach be brought to bear on the environment. Only through study and mastery of human expression can the student achieve a deeper environmental understanding and communicate the nature of the relationship between people and their environment (p.4).

These statements point to the role language arts play in developing our biological, cultural and social understandings, as well as providing a means of passing society's dominant attitudes and values on to future generations. E.D. Hirsch (1984) identifies such attributes in relation to English education, noting that the cultural aspect of the English curriculum should receive at least equal attention as the technical components of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In supporting his position Hirsch states,

> The effective functioning of every modern nation depends upon a national culture that is associated with the artifice of a national written language. English introduced our youth into a shared culture that enables citizens to communicate with each other, live together peacefully, and work together productively (p.371-372).

If the educational system seeks to assist in promoting a holistic, environmental ideology, educators must recognize the acculturative role of the language arts. Unless language arts is emphasized and given a prominent role in an environmental curriculum, attitudinal change is likely to be very slow. In the words of Hirsch (1984),

> The fastest and best way for a culture to adjust to new developments in technology is for its members to be <u>culturally</u> literate (p.374).

Cultural literacy, then, will help in creating a shared national culture. If our national culture emphasizes a holistic environmental ideology, the common insights

generated by a literate society could aid in reversing the trend towards polarization and misunderstanding. If the language arts curriculum is allowed to foster this holistic environmental ideology, then greater emphasis should be placed on the integrative potential of this subject, as well as the means by which it can be taught in an environmental context.

Teaching Language Arts in an Environmental Context

Due to the fact that educators are faced with a curriculum structure that is very segmented, i.e., each subject being dealt with as a separate entity, it is necessary for environmental educators to teach from an integrative perspective. The teachers of language arts are very fortunate that their subject lends itself well to this teaching methodology.

In realization of the integrative potential of language arts, the Expresswaus language arts series (Thorn and Irwin, 1981) integrates the four language processes of listening, speaking, reading and writing through thematic units, with a number of these units being environmentally oriented. This approach exemplifies an effective means of strengthening the cultural aspects of language arts and its integration with other subjects. In each level in the series there are also thematic units that attempt to integrate language skills with the material of specific subjects. Rather than concentrate only on the language skills useful in social studies,

science, or mathematics, the classroom teacher can expand these integrative-skills units to encompass the learning that is actually occuring in those other subjects. By considering a general theme and co-ordinating the learning in various other subjects, teachers could develop comprehensive, integrated units that would emphasize the role of language arts and provide a holistic approach to environmental education.

To help emphasize the cultural aspects of language arts, as well as teach the basic skills of the subject, reading, writing, listening and speaking can be taught environmentally. The Expresswaus Level 10, Unit 82: Concern for the Natural Environment (Thorn and Irwin, 1981) exemplifies the opportunities that exist for teaching this way.

In the example unit reading and comprehension are taught through the use of environmental poems and stories. There are also numerous suggestions for supplimental student reading at the beginning of the unit. Suggestions include books on wildlife, pollution, vanishing cultures, and natural hazards. Such materials can be easily utilized as reading material in other subjects.

Listening can be taught very effectively both in the classroom and outdoors. Listening activities in the outdoors can encourage identifying many natural and/or human-related sounds. The example unit incorporates listening to

environmental poems and stories, as well as the opinions of peers on environmental issues. The activity on interviewing could be expanded beyond role-playing to actually interviewing others in the school and/or community.

In exposing students to the natural environment, a sense of familiarity and stewardship can be enhanced through vocabulary. A natural object may be described blindfolded, using a different word than those used by others in the group; by having members of a group describe an object, such as a tree, each from a different perspective and then composing a group poem with the words; or by recording everything noticed about a particular natural object. Such descriptions encourage the use of all five senses and can be used to create poems, stories, or to further an inquiry. Other activities such as comparing a forest to a hotel and writing a story to describe the difference encourages writing and vocabulary as well as an understanding that the forest is a living ecosystem.

Speech and dramatics add further depth and insight to the unit theme. Students should be encouraged to describe their sensory perceptions and express their ideas through discussions and role-playing. An environmental debate could easily develop from such activities.

Creative writing can also be extended through this unit. Example activities include adopting a tree, taking a fish eye view of an oil spill, devising 101 uses for a plastic

container, writing poetry, and creating a television or radio production.

This entire language arts unit (Thorn and Irwin, 1981, Level10, Unit 8) also provides an excellent opportunity to incorporate other subjects. Science activities are naturally integrated in this unit when considering the water cycle in the story, "How the Ocean Grows". Similarly, social studies is of central importance when discussing the impact on a marsh when it is reclaimed for use by people in the unit's poem, "Filling in the Marsh", or when discussing why people have become concerned about the pollution problem. With a little forethought other subjects such as mathematics, art, music, and physical education may also be integrated so as to promote a less segragated curriculum.

Conclusion

The above example of environmental language arts were developed by simply analysing a language arts unit for its environmental and integrative potential. It is up to classroom teachers to take this first step and develop units when they do not exist. Environmental education is too important to be left as a segmented, one-sided topic in science or social studies. Through language arts environmental ethics can be incorporated into our shared national culture and environmental education can be given a more integrated base so that we may begin to approach environmental issues with a more holistic environmental

ideology so that they may one day become a realization of the past.

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